

# A Bad Sine

By Lt. Chris Tabert

**W**e've all heard the phrase, "Don't get complacent on admin portions of the flight." Here's some more documentation.

We had been on cruise for four months and operating in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) for almost three months. The admin part of the brief was standard, but I fully realized I had to think about it each flight. Although I was a nugget, I felt more confident going in-country. This day seemed no different than the rest, with three big-wing tankers scheduled for our time over the beach.

Midway through the flight, my lead checked us off-station to head to our mid-cycle tanker; we were scheduled for a KC-135R. On our rendezvous with the tanker, instead of the usual "iron maiden" or short hose coming off the centerline boom, our tanker had a wing-mounted pod next to the port outboard engine. The hose is colored to help the pilot tell when enough hose is retracted to start refueling. However, being sunset, it was difficult to see the colors on the hose, and I had to rely only on the pod lights. While not yet dark enough for NVGs (night-vision goggles), we rendezvoused without incident.

The KC-135R tanker was in a left-hand turn, with some light turbulence, when my lead was cleared to the port wing. Without a right-wing pod, I had to wait until my lead had finished. As he headed back to our previous kill box, I was cleared into the left pod. The basket seemed to dance around more than normal because of the turbulence, but I managed to plug. The hose was very slow to retract, but eventually I got flow and took about 1,000 pounds before seeing the yellow light. I couldn't tell how much hose was taken up, and with my momentum, I fell out of the basket.

Cleared back in, I got into the basket but ended up low with the hose not retracting. This situation, in turn, created a large, C-shaped bend in the hose. Instead of recognizing a bad situation and working to straighten the hose, I got impatient trying to get it to retract. The hose started to retract but then suddenly stopped, which sent a large sine wave my way. I really did not have time to react and only could remember thinking,

"This is not good!" as the wave made it to my jet. The large bow in the hose gave the wave a lot of momentum and ripped off my probe tip. I was told this situation has happened a lot with the wing pods because sine waves are so unpredictable and fast.

After I told the tanker my probe was gone, I thought of where to divert. I had several options. I did not have the gas to make it back to the boat, but I could make it to Kandahar with 2,000 pounds above bingo. By now, lead had joined on me, and we turned for Kandahar air base.

I was certain my probe tip still was in the basket, so I was not worried about a possible FOD of my right motor. I also had no indications of fuel ingestion or overtemp. My lead let the tanker know he most likely was sour and that my probe tip still was in the basket. I elected to stay at our altitude of 20,000 feet.

The field was about 150 miles away, so I had time to break out my airwing smart pack, which contained approach plates for the field. Lead gave me an airborne inspection for any other damage and to look at my probe. I had left the probe out, but after the airborne inspection showed just the tip was gone, I retracted the probe and continued to my divert.

Once switched to Kandahar approach, they did not want to clear me to land because of a lack of a PPR (prior permission required). I declared a fuel emergency, which took care of the PPR issue, and was cleared for a straight-in on runway 23. By this time, the weather was very dark but completely VFR for the straight-in. My lead loitered overhead until I shut down, and he then returned to the ship.

Here I am, a junior nugget wingman at some field in Afghanistan having little clue what to do. I was parked at an offramp, facing out of range of any building because of the hot gun and AIM 9X. After shutting down, I learned no one there ever had dealt with Hornets, so I de-armed the aircraft.

At base operations, I broke out the smart pack and called the ship. The numbers were good, and I quickly got in contact with operations. Because I couldn't tank



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and still was carrying more than 1,000 pounds of ordnance, the ship had me stay overnight and fly back for a daytime pattern. This plan also would let the ship maneuver to have a bingo field available just for me; at the time we were working blue-water-ops tank states. While I got a place to stay and something to eat, two Dutch F-16 pilots came by to help me.

**T**he Dutch maintainers took a look at the jet and confirmed the probe was broken—they couldn't fix it. I had to have the jet towed because I was parked in a heavy FOD area. Again, because of their lack of Hornet experience, I had to help the tow guy hook up the jet. Once my jet was parked on a nice new ramp with the F-16s across base, I realized communications would be a problem because the Dutch phones couldn't dial DSN. To get in touch with the ship, I had to go across the entire base to base ops. After dinner, I called it a night, but I was worried about my plan for the next day.


In the morning, I checked on the jet and answered some questions from the morning crew of Dutch maintainers. Fortunately, the combined-air-operations-coordination center (CAOCC) took care of all my flight planning with an air-tasking officer (ATO) call sign and a recovery time back on *Ike*. All that was left was to get gas. Once again, the fuel-truck driver never had fueled a Hornet before, so I had to help him. The Dutch said they would launch me and asked if I had anything special to be done. I decided

not to arm anything, so I just briefed them on the standard start-up. The weather was great. I did a thorough pre-flight that included a good diving of the ducts. Everything started up fine, and the Dutch did a great job launching me. I took off and worked the time-distance problem to arrive at the ship at the briefed time and fuel state. I trapped without incident.

I learned a lot from my overnight stay in Kandahar. I was thankful I had all the divert info to look at. This preparation made it much easier to land at a foreign field. Being comfortable with the procedures for getting into and out of country also helped, especially on the solo return flight. I was able to work the time-distance-fuel problem, so I could make it back on time and max trap.

My earlier experience on a cross-country in the Hornet was a huge help. Although de-arming by myself was a first, knowing where to safe the weapons was calming. All the necessary parking precautions were taken. Having all this experience was important because nobody at Kandahar had dealt with Hornets.

Finally, my biggest lesson learned was to concentrate on the task at hand and do it to the best of my ability. I was complacent while tanking and tried to remedy a bad situation when I should have backed out and reset.

Thank you to Maj. Henk "Bull" Bakker and the rest of the Dutch Viper pilots that helped me get back to the boat. 

Lt. Tabert flies with VFA 131.